



# A crash course in FALL PREVENTION

Falls have long been a mainstay of comedy but every year they cause serious disability in people young and old

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**THIS MORNING, I TRIPPED** on a pile of magazines beside my bed. (Occupational hazard: writers are notorious for hoarding magazines.) This afternoon, I almost took a spill when I ran into tea towels on my hardwood stairs destined for our second-floor laundry room. And, after dinner, while I was on all fours cleaning Cheerios haphazardly tossed all over my kitchen floor by my one-year-old, I nearly fell over her when I went to stand up and didn't notice her right behind me. (Thankfully, I didn't land right on Peyton; I broke my fall by twisting my wrist on our granite countertop.)

It's true. The risk of falling inside or outside of the home becomes greater as we age. But seniors aren't the only ones who routinely trip or slip around the house. Health Canada says that falls are the "most common cause of injury-related hospitalization among both young and elderly Canadians." Children under five, people with any type of mobility issue or physical limitation (people who use walking aids or suffer from sports injuries) and people with vision problems are all at an increased risk.

A stumble on the stairs, a fall on the ice while shovelling or a slip on a wet kitchen floor can result in serious and long-term disabilities such as spinal cord and head injuries and chronic fractures. These can lead to reduced quality of life and even death. One-third of all people 65 and older will fall at least once each year, which costs Canadians \$3 billion annually. Accidental falls currently account for almost 80% of injury-related deaths among Canadian seniors.

The bright side is that, unlike so many other health issues and injuries, falls are completely preventable — if you're proactive about minimizing the risks and protecting yourself. "There are very simple tricks and tips people of all ages can implement in their homes to decrease the risk of falling causing injury," says Aimee Bryl, an occupational therapist in Whitby, Ont. Here's how.

## The obvious



### INDOORS

- Start with proper lighting and ensure that the busiest and most travelled areas in the home (e.g., stairs, halls, bathroom, kitchen) are well lit.
- Tackle the layout of your furniture. Do you constantly have to walk around your coffee table because it sticks out too far and is difficult to pass with ease? Rearrange your decor if flow impedes safety. Contrasting colours may enhance visibility.

- Get rid of loose area rugs and make sure cords and wires are tucked away and not lying loosely on floors.
- "The stairs are always a cause of concern for people who have limited or poor vision," says Bryl. She recommends putting a small piece of masking or coloured tape on the edge of each step so the distance between each stair is clearly highlighted.



### OUTDOORS

- In the summer, keep plants and flowers trimmed and out of walkways.
- Keep your hose wrapped up in a corner or mounted on a wall when not in use.
- In the winter, regularly salt and shovel your driveway, walkway and porch.
- Always keep entrances well lit, and make sure you fix any damaged stairs.

## The not-so-obvious

If you need glasses, wear them. "You'd be surprised how many people don't bother wearing their glasses at home and then trip because they can't see properly," says Bryl.

- Love to slide into your fluffy pink slippers the minute you get in the door? Be sure there are grips on the soles so you don't skate across hardwood floors.
- If you have pets, be aware of where they are in the house. In 2009, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta published that close to 90,000 injuries are caused each year by people tripping over their furry friends.

## The worst offenders indoors and out

"The bathroom is definitely one of the most dangerous rooms in the house," Bryl says. Non-slip tub mats, non-slip bath mats (outside of shower doors and tubs), grab bars in the tub and shower chairs should be used to prevent falls. Cleaning spills quickly and fixing leaks are musts.

- Consider investing in a pair of spikes that can be fastened to boots to give you traction in the snow and on the ice during winter. (You can also purchase something similar to stick onto the end of a cane if you use one.)
- Make sure wooden decks are cleared of slimy, slippery moss and moulds or have non-slip runners.
- Keep salt or de-icing compound near exits so you can sow as you go if need be.
- Avoid taking shortcuts through unplowed laneways and across icy parks.
- Don't run through slush to cross on the tail end of the pedestrian walk signal or green light; wait for the next one.

## THE DOS AND DON'TS OF FALL-PROOFING TOTS

- **DO** install safety gates at the top and bottom of staircases.
- **DO** keep stairs and landings clear of toys and other bits and pieces.
- **DO** buy rubber-soled shoes for kids to play in.
- **DO** use window guards or stops on all windows above the first floor.
- **DON'T** put babies in car seats or booster chairs on countertops.
- **DON'T** let little ones use baby walkers.
- **DON'T** let young kids play on park equipment meant for older kids. (A good rule of thumb is that if a child needs help climbing or getting down from equipment, he or she shouldn't be on it.)

## DID YOU KNOW?

If you feel you haven't minimized the risk of taking a nasty spill in the home or you're concerned about an aging parent, you can get your living space assessed by experts who are trained in fall prevention. The public health departments in most regions and cities across the country have fall prevention programs designed to educate and provide in-home assessments.